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Saudi king shuns extremism as faiths gather

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By Andrew Hay

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MADRID (Reuters) - Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah called on followers of the world's major faiths to turn away from extremism and seek reconciliation as he opened an unprecedented interfaith conference in Madrid on Wednesday.

The Saudi-sponsored gathering aims to draw Muslims, Jews and Christians closer together and isolate those who use religion to justify violence or intolerance.

It was the first time Saudi Arabia, where non-Muslims cannot practice their faith openly, had invited Jews to such a meeting.

The king also invited Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs as he showcased a more tolerant side to Saudi Arabia's strict Wahhabi Islam, under fire since 15 Saudis were among the 19 Arabs who carried out the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York.

"My brothers, we must tell the world differences do not lead to conflict and confrontation," said King Abdullah, flanked by Spain's King Juan Carlos at a royal palace west of Madrid.

"Tragedies that have occurred in history were not caused by religion but extremism adopted by some of the followers of each one of the religions, and political systems."

Jewish and Christian leaders said Abdullah had struck a blow against religious fanaticism by gathering believers from so many faiths under the same roof.

The meeting could not take place in Saudi Arabia, where traditional clerics have shunned contact with non-Muslims and even seen other Muslims, particularly Shi'ites, as infidels.

There were no Israeli Jewish leaders or Palestinian Christian or Muslim delegates on the list of 288 religious, political and cultural figures attending the event, including Tony Blair and Jesse Jackson.

"If it moves ahead and there are meetings including official Israeli representatives in Saudi Arabia and it expands this, it will be the wonderful beginning of a very historic process," said Rabbi David Rosen of the American Jewish Committee.

"If it doesn't do that then it's another photo opportunity," said the British-born rabbi, who is based in Jerusalem but was listed at the conference as American.

HUGE STEP FORWARD

King Abdullah said previous attempts at interfaith dialogue had failed because they had focused on religious differences.

"If we want to have success in this historical meeting, we have to emphasize what we have in common, the belief and deep faith in God," said the monarch. "Religions should be a way to bridge our differences and not cause disputes."

The king launched the dialogue plan after meeting Pope Benedict at the Vatican in November. Spain, once Muslim ruled, was chosen as a venue after the Saudi king visited last year.

"This will not be a one-off conference. I'm sure the commitment of the king to engage in dialogue will continue," said Anthony Ball, Secretary for International and Inter- Religious Relations for Archbishop of Canterbury.

Rabbi Marc Schneier, North American chairman of the World Jewish Congress, said King Abdullah was reaching out to other faiths to counter extremists and fanatics within Islam.

"What I heard from him is that 'I represent Islam, and I am the voice of moderation'," said Schneier.

(Editing by Tom Heneghan)

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